

Report shows kids at risk in rural areas

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for the East Oregonian

The latest report by Children First for Oregon shows children in eastern Oregon face greater health and safety risks than do children in the rest of the state.

For instance, because of the distance to health centers and the lack of public transportation, children in rural areas are less likely to be immunized than children in the Willamette Valley. It's estimated that 77 percent of the toddlers in Umatilla County are fully immunized, compared to 84 percent in Multnomah County.

Child abuse rates have officially dropped across the state, according to the report. But officials suspect that is primarily due to a lack of investigations into allegations. Initial reports of abuse and neglect have risen by 42 percent since 1992, but budgets and staff have not increased to accommodate the increase in cases. And in rural Oregon particularly, social workers expressed distress over increasing neglect due to high methamphetamine use.

The state budget crisis is

beginning to effect basic health care. Nine percent of children statewide remain uninsured, but in eastern Oregon 14 percent have no insurance coverage. The report explains the difference as partly due to low insurance coverage in forest and agriculture industries (an estimated 48 percent of that work force is covered by insurance), compared to relatively high coverage from urban manufacturing industries (78 percent coverage). The majority of health insurance is funded through the work place.

Finally, Oregon remains number one in hunger in the country. Fourteen percent of households statewide, which includes about 465,000 Oregonians, are "food insecure," meaning they often skip meals or eat nutritionally poor foods because of lack of resources. In Umatilla and Morrow counties, 11 percent of eighth graders reported living in "food insecure" households.

According to the report, hungry children are more likely to get sick, experience psychological distress and perform poorly at school and in social situations.